Required readings:

"Crowd Control", Hannah Arendt Restores the Definition", and Simone Weil Demystifies the Word".

Preamble

CROWD CONTROL

by Lewis H. Lapham

In case of rain, the revolution will take place in the hall.
—Erwin Chargaff

This issue of *Lapham's Quarterly* takes up the topic of revolution because for the last several years the word has been hanging around backstage on the national television talk-show circuit waiting for somebody, anybody—visionary poet, unemployed automobile worker, late-night comedian—to cue its appearance on camera. I picture the word sitting alone in the green room with the bottled water and a banana, armed with press clippings of its once-upon-a-time star turns in America's political theater (tie-dyed and brassiereless on the barricades of the 1960s countercultural insurrection, short-haired and seersucker smug behind the desks of the 1980s Reagan Risorgimento), asking itself why it's not being brought into the segment between the German and the Japanese car commercial. Surely even the teleprompter must know that it is the beast in the belly of the news reports, more of them every day in print and *en blog*, about income inequality, class conflict, the American police state. Why then does nobody have any use for it except in the form of the adjective, *revolutionary*, unveiling a new cellphone app or a new shade of lipstick?

I can think of several reasons, among them the cautionary tale told by the round-the-clock media footage of dead revolutionaries in Syria, Egypt, and Tunisia, also the certain knowledge that anything anybody says (on camera or off, to a hotel clerk, a Facebook friend, or an ATM) will be monitored for security purposes. Even so, the stockpiling of so much careful silence among people who like to imagine themselves on the same page with Patrick Henry—"Give me liberty, or give me death"—raises the question as to what has become of the American spirit of rebellion. Where have all the flowers gone, and what, if anything, is anybody willing to risk in the struggle for "Freedom Now," "Power to the People," "Change We Can Believe In"?

Iranians who had been charged as counterrevolutionaries being shot in the head by Judge Sadegh Khalkhaili's bodyguard following a show trial, 1979. Photograph by Jahangir Razmi.

My guess is next to nothing that can't be written off as a business expense or qualified as a tax deduction, but the text and illustration on the pages that follow open the discussion to authorities more reliably informed—among them Aristotle, Edmund Burke, Rembrandt van Rijn, Karl Marx, Adolf Hitler, Che Guevara, and Václav Havel—with the thought that they might hearten the ci-devant celebrity guest in the green room with no chance of its being put up against a wall or pulled out of a hat. Not in America at least, but maybe, with a better publicist and 50 percent of the foreign rights, somewhere east of the sun or west of the moon.

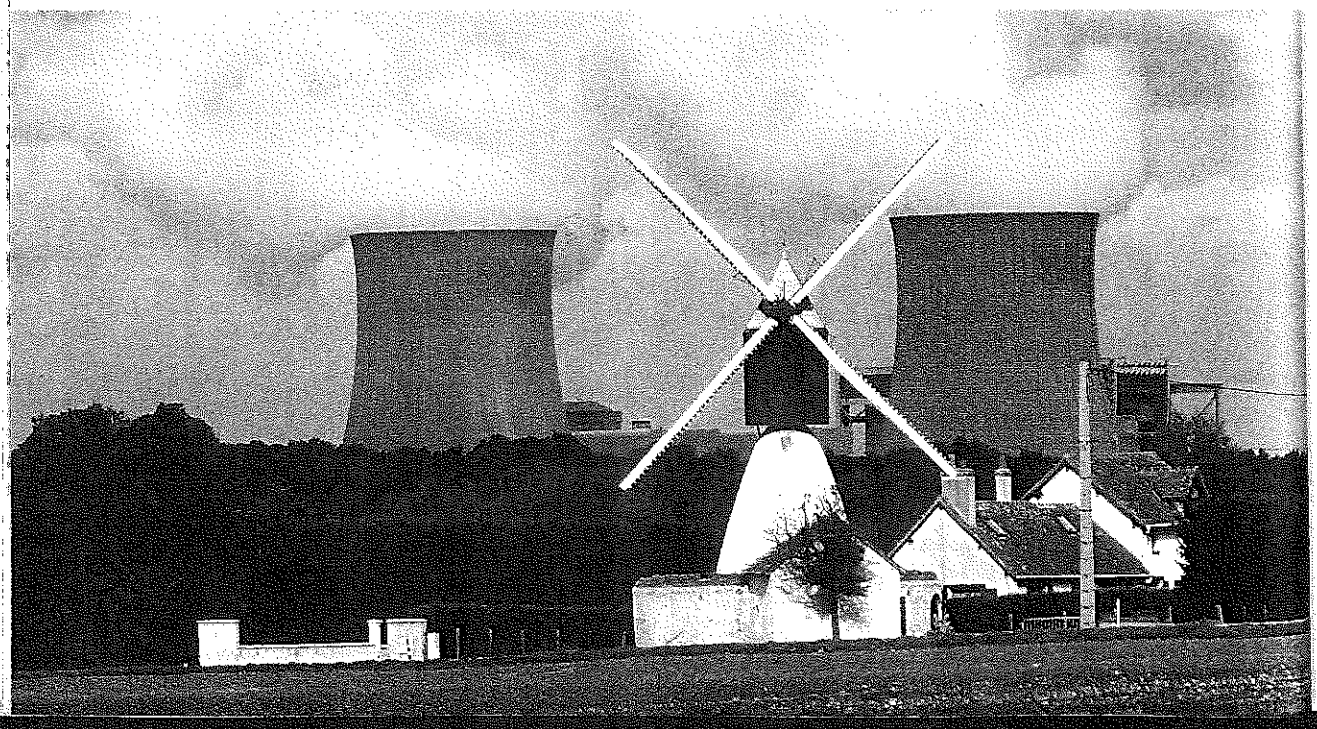
The hallowed American notion of armed rebellion as a civic duty stems from the letter that Thomas Jefferson writes from Paris in 1787 (page 154) as a further commentary on the new Constitution drawn up that year in Philadelphia, a document that he thinks invests the state with an unnecessary power to declare the citizenry out of order. A mistake, says Jefferson, because no country can preserve its political liberties unless its rulers know that their people preserve the spirit of resistance, and with it ready access to gunpowder.

"The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure."

Jefferson conceived of liberty and despotism as plantings in the soil of politics, products of human cultivation subject to changes in the weather, the difference between them not unlike that between the growing of an orchard and the draining of a cesspool, both understood as means of environmental protection. It is the turning of the seasons and the cyclical motions of the stars that Jefferson has in mind when in his letter he goes on to say, "God forbid we should ever be twenty years without such a rebellion"—i.e., one conceived not as a lawless upheaval but as a lawful recovery.

The twentieth-century philosopher and political scientist Hannah Arendt (*Chicago*, page 32) says that the American Revolution was intended as a restoration of what its progenitors believed to be a natural order of things "disturbed and violated" by the despotism of an overbearing monarchy and the abuses of its colonial

Traditional windmill in front of Saint-Laurent des Eaux nuclear-power plant, Saint-Laurent-Nouan, France, 1999. Photography by Thomas Hoepker.



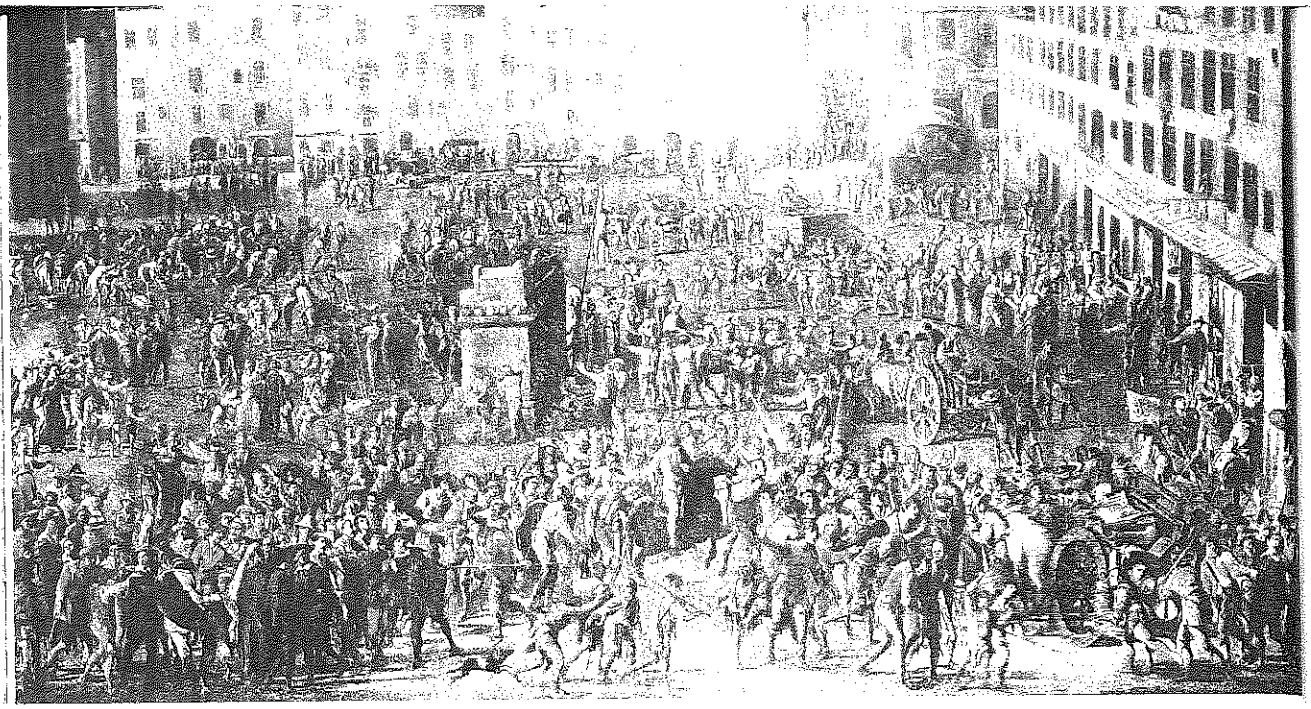
government. During the hundred years prior to the Declaration of Independence, the Americans had developed tools of political management (church congregations, village assemblies, town meetings) with which to govern themselves in accordance with what they took to be the ancient liberties possessed by their fellow Englishmen on the far side of the Atlantic Ocean. They didn't bear the grievances of a subjugated populace, and the seeds of revolt were nowhere blowing in the wind until the British crown demanded new, and therefore unlawful, tax money.

Arendt's retrieval of the historical context leads her to say of the war for independence that it was "not revolutionary except by inadvertence." To sustain the point she calls on Benjamin Franklin's memory of the years preceding the shots fired at Lexington in April 1775: "I never had heard in any conversation from any person, drunk or sober, the least expression of a wish for a separation, or hint that such a thing would be advantageous to America." The men who came to power after the Revolution were the same men who held power before the Revolution, their new government grounded in a system of thought that was, in our modern parlance, conservative.

Born thirteen years later under the fixed star of a romantic certainty, the French Revolution was advertent, a violent overthrow of what its proponents, among them Maximilien de Robespierre (*Paris*, page 110), perceived as an unnatural order of things. Away with the old, in with the new; kill the king, remove the statues, reset the clocks, welcome to a world that never was but soon is yet to come. The freedom-loving songs and slogans were well suited to the work of ecstatic demolition, but a guillotine is not a living tree, and although manured with the blood of aristocrats and priests, it failed to blossom with the leaves of political liberty. An armed mob of newly baptized *citoyens* stormed the Bastille in 1789; Napoleon in 1804 crowned himself emperor in the cathedral of Notre Dame.

Jefferson's thinking had been informed by his study of nature and history, Robespierre's by his reading of Rousseau's poetics. Neither set of political ideas brought forth the dream-come-true products of the nineteenth-century Industrial Revolution—new worlds being born every day of the week, the incoming tide of modern manufacture and invention (the cotton gin, gas lighting, railroads) washing away the sand castles of medieval religion and Renaissance humanism, dismantling Robespierre's reign of virtue, uprooting Jefferson's tree of liberty.

So it is left to Karl Marx, along with Friedrich Engels, to acknowledge the arrival of the new world that never was with the publication in German of the *Communist Manifesto* in 1848 (*London*, page 42): "The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society." Men shape their tools, their tools shape their relations with other men, and the rain it raineth every day in a perfect storm of creative destruction that is amoral and relentless. The ill wind, according to Marx, blows from any and all points of the political compass with the "single, unconscionable freedom—free trade," which resolves "personal worth into exchange value," substitutes "callous 'cash payment'" for every other form of human meaning and endeavor, devotes its all-devouring enthusiasms to "naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation."



Piazza del Mercato During the Revolt of Masaniello, an insurrection led by the illiterate fisherman Masaniello against Spanish tyranny in Naples, by Domenico Gargiulo, 1647.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the energies of the capitalist dynamic take full and proud possession of the whole of Western society. They become, in Marx's analysis, the embodiment of "the modern representative state," armed with the wealth of its always newer and more powerful machines (electricity, photography, the telephone, the automobile) and staffed by executives (i.e., politicians, no matter how labeled) who function as "a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie."

What Marx sees in theory as an insatiable abstraction, the American historian Henry Adams (*Paris*, page 128) sees as concrete and overwhelming fact. Marx is seventeen years dead and the *Communist Manifesto* a sacred text among the left-wing intelligentsia everywhere in Europe when Adams, his habit of mind as profoundly conservative as that of his great-grandfather, stands in front of a colossal dynamo at the Paris Exposition in 1900 and knows that Prometheus, no longer chained to his ancient rock, bestrides the earth wearing J. P. Morgan's top hat and P. T. Barnum's cloak of as many colors as the traffic will bear. Adams shares with Marx the leaning toward divine revelation:

> To Adams the dynamo became a symbol of infinity. As he grew accustomed to the great gallery of machines, he began to feel the forty-foot dynamos as a moral force, much as the early Christians felt the Cross. The planet itself seemed less impressive, in its old-fashioned, deliberate, annual or daily revolution, than this huge wheel, revolving within arm's length at some vertiginous speed...Before the end, one began to pray to it; inherited instinct taught the natural expression of man before silent and infinite force.

I inherited the instinct as a true-born American bred to the worship of both machinery and money; an appreciation of its force I acquired during a lifetime of reading newspaper reports of political uprisings in the provinces of the bourgeois

world state—in China, Israel, and Greece in the 1940s; in the 1950s those in Hungary, Cuba, Guatemala, Algeria, Egypt, Bolivia, and Iran; in the 1960s in Vietnam, France, America, Ethiopia, and the Congo; in the 1970s and 1980s in El Salvador, Poland, Nicaragua, Kenya, Argentina, Chile, Indonesia, Czechoslovakia, Turkey, Jordan, Cambodia, again in Iran; over the last twenty-four years in Russia, Venezuela, Lebanon, Croatia, Bosnia, Libya, Tunisia, Syria, Ukraine, Iraq, Somalia, South Africa, Romania, Sudan, again in Algeria and Egypt. The plot line tends to repeat itself—first the new flag on the roof of the palace, rapturous crowds in the streets waving banners; then searches, requisitions, massacres, severed heads raised on pikes; soon afterward the transfer of power from one police force to another police force, the latter more repressive than the former (darker uniforms, heavier motorcycles) because more frightened of the social and economic upheavals they can neither foresee nor control.

All the shiftings of political power produced changes within the committees managing regional budgets and social contracts on behalf of the bourgeois imperium. None of them dethroned or defenestrated Adams' dynamo or threw off the chains of Marx's cash nexus. That they could possibly do so is the "romantic idea" that Albert Camus (*Paris*, page 108), correspondent for the French Resistance newspaper *Combat* during and after World War II, sees in 1946 as having been "consigned to fantasy by advances in the technology of weaponry."

Revolutions have never lightened the burden of tyranny, they have only shifted it to another shoulder. —*George Bernard Shaw, 1903*

The French philosopher Simone Weil (*Paris*, page 195) draws a corollary lesson from her acquaintance with the Civil War in Spain, and from her study of the communist Sturm und Drang in Russia, Germany, and France subsequent to World War I. "One magic word today seems capable of compensating for all sufferings, resolving all anxieties, avenging the past, curing present ills, summing up all future possibilities: that word is *revolution*...This word has aroused such pure acts of devotion, has repeatedly caused such generous blood to be shed, has constituted for so many unfortunates the only source of courage for living, that it is almost a sacrilege to investigate it; all this, however, does not prevent it from possibly being meaningless."

During the turbulent decade of the 1960s in the United States, the advancing technologies of bourgeois news production (pictures in place of print) transformed the meaningless magic word into a profitable commodity, marketing it both as deadly menace and lively fashion statement. The commercial putsch wasn't organized by the CIA or planned by a consortium of advertising agencies; it evolved in two stages as a function of the capitalist dynamic that substitutes cash payment for every other form of human meaning and endeavor.

The disorderly citizenry furnishing the television footage in the early sixties didn't wish to overthrow the government of the United States. Nobody was threatening to reset the game clock in the Rose Bowl, tear down Grand Central Terminal, or remove the Lincoln Memorial. The men, women, and children confronting racist tyranny in the American South—sitting at a lunch counter in Alabama, riding a bus into Mississippi, going to school in Arkansas—risked their

lives in pure acts of devotion, refreshing the tree of liberty with the blood of patriots. The Civil Rights movement and later the anti–Vietnam War protests were reformative, not revolutionary, the expression of democratic objection and dissent in accord with the thinking of Jefferson, also with President John F. Kennedy's having said in his 1961 inaugural address, "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country." Performed as a civic duty, the unarmed rebellions led to the enactment in the mid-1960s of the Economic Opportunity Act, the Voting Rights Act, the Medicare and Medicaid programs, eventually to the shutting down of the war in Vietnam.

The television camera, however, isn't much interested in political reform (slow, tedious, and unphotogenic) and so, even in the first years of protest, the news media presented the trouble running around loose in the streets as a revolution along the lines of the one envisioned by Robespierre. Caught in the chains of the cash nexus, they couldn't do otherwise. The fantasy of armed revolt sold papers, boosted ratings, monetized the fears at all times running around loose in the heads of the propertied classes. The multiple wounds in the body politic over the course of the decade—the assassination of President Kennedy, big-city race riots, student riots at venerable universities, the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Senator Robert F. Kennedy—amplified the states of public alarm. The fantastic fears of violent revolt awakened by a news media in search of a profit stimulated the demand for repressive surveillance and heavy law enforcement that over the last fifty years has blossomed into one of the richest and most innovative of the nation's growth industries. For our own good, of course, and without forgoing our constitutional right to shop.

He that goeth about to persuade a multitude that they are not so well governed as they ought to be shall never want attentive and favorable hearers.
—Richard Hooker, 1594

God forbid that the excitement of the 1960s should in any way have interfered with the constant revolutionizing of the bourgeois desire for more dream-come-true products to consume and possess. The advancing power of the media solved what might have become a problem by disarming the notion of revolution as a public good, rebranding it as a private good. Again it was impossible for the technology to do otherwise. The medium is the message, and because the camera sees but doesn't think, it substitutes the personal for the impersonal; whether in Hollywood restaurants or Washington committee rooms, the actor takes precedence over the act. What is wanted is a flow of emotion, not a train of thought, a vocabulary of images better suited to the selling of a product than to the expression of an idea. Narrative becomes montage, and as commodities acquire the property of information, the amassment of wealth follows from the naming of things rather than the making of things.

The voices of conscience in the early 1960s spoke up for a government of laws, not men, for a principle as opposed to a lifestyle. By the late 1960s the political had become personal, the personal political, and it was no longer necessary to ask what one must do for one's country. The new-and-improved question, available in a wide range of colors, flower arrangements, cosmetics, and musical accompaniments, underwrote the second-stage commodification of the troubled spirit of the times.

The Cross, by Albin Egger-Lienz, c.1902. Tyrolean peasants revolting against French and Bavarian occupation of Tyrol in 1809.

Writing about the socialist turbulence on the late-1930s European left, Weil lists among the acolytes of the magic word, "the bourgeois adolescent in rebellion against home surroundings and school routine, the intellectual yearning for adventure and suffering from boredom." So again in America in the late 1960s, radical debutantes wearing miniskirts and ammunition belts, Ivy League professors mounting the steps of the Pentagon, self-absorbed movie actors handing around anarchist manifestos to self-important journalists seated at the tables in Elaine's. By the autumn of 1968 the restaurant on the Upper East Side of Manhattan served as a Station of the Cross for the would-be revolutionaries briefly in town for an interview with *Time* or a photo shoot for *Vogue*, and as a frequent guest of the restaurant, I could see on nearly any night of the week the birth of a new and imaginary self soon to become a boldfaced name. Every now and then I asked one of the wandering stars what it was that he or she hoped to have and to hold once the revolution was won. Most of them were at a loss for an answer. What they knew, they did not want, what they wanted, they did not know, except, of course, more—more life, more love, more drugs, more celebrity, more happiness, more music.

As a consequence of the political becoming personal, by the time the 1960s moved on to the 1980s and President Reagan's Morning in America, it was no longer possible to know oneself as an American citizen without the further identification of at least one value-adding, consumer-privileged adjective—female American, rich American, black

American, Native American, old American, poor American, gay American, white American, dead American. The costumes changed, and so did the dossier of the malcontents believing themselves entitled to more than they already had. A generation of dissatisfied bourgeois reluctant to grow up gave way to another generation of dissatisfied bourgeois unwilling to grow old. The locus of the earthly Paradise shifted from a commune in the White Mountains to a gated golf resort in Palm Springs, and the fond hope of finding oneself transformed into an artist segued into the determined effort to make oneself rich. What remained constant was the policy of enlightened selfishness and the signature bourgeois passion for more plums in the pudding.

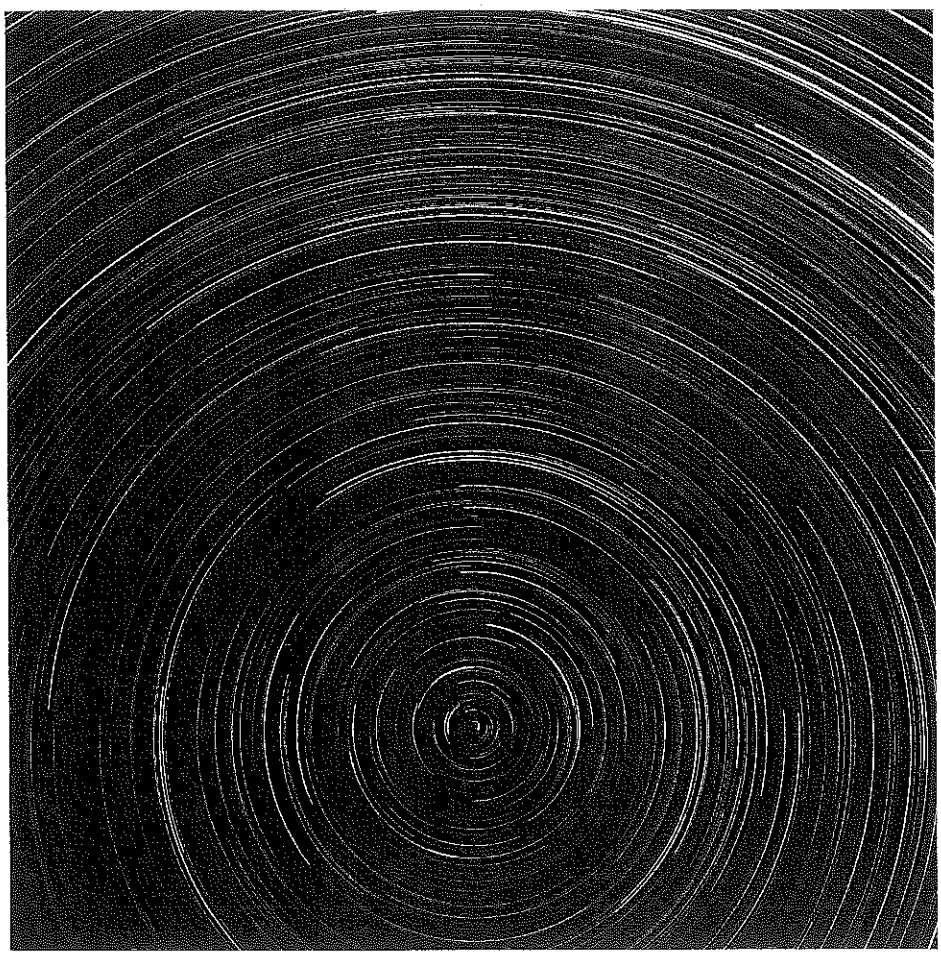
While making a magical mystery tour of the Central American revolutionary scene in 1987, Deb Olin Unferth (*Managua*, page 136) remarks on the work in progress: "Compared to El Salvador, Nicaragua was like Ping-Pong...like a cheerful communist kazoo concert...We were bringing guitars, plays adapted from Nikolai Gogol, elephants wearing tasseled hats. I saw it myself and even then I found it a bit odd. The Nicaraguans wanted land, literacy, a decent doctor. We wanted a nice singalong and a ballet. We weren't a revolution. We were an armed circus."

Insurrection of thought always precedes insurrection of arms.

—Wendell Phillips, 1859

As a descriptive phrase for what American society has become over the course of the last five decades, *armed circus* is as good as any and better than most. The constantly revolutionizing technologies have been spinning the huge bourgeois wheel of fortune at the speed of light, remaking the means of production in every field of human meaning and endeavor—media, manufacturing, war, finance, literature, crime, medicine, art, transport, and agriculture. The storm wind of creative destruction it bloweth every day, removing steel mills, relocating labor markets, clearing the ground for cloud storage. On both sides of the balance sheet, the accumulations of more—more microbreweries and Internet connections, more golf balls, cheeseburgers, and cruise missiles; also more unemployment, more pollution, more obesity, more dysfunctional government and criminal finance, more fear. The too much of more than anybody knows what to do with obliges the impresarios of the armed circus to match the gains of personal liberty (sexual, social, economic, if one can afford the going price) with more repressive systems of crowd control.

To look back to the early 1960s is to recall a society in many ways more open and free than it has since become, when a pair of blue jeans didn't come with a radio-frequency ID tag, when it was possible to appear for a job interview without a urine sample, to say in public what is now best said not at all. So frightened of its own citizens that it classifies them as probable enemies, the U.S. government steps up its scrutiny of what it chooses to regard as a mob. So intrusive is the surveillance that nobody leaves home without it. Tens of thousands of cameras installed in the lobbies of office and apartment buildings and in the eye sockets of the mannequins in department-store windows register the comings and goings of a citizenry deemed unfit to mind its own business.



Stars #906, by David Stephenson, 1999. Chromogenic print.

The social contract offered by the managing agents of the bourgeois state doesn't extend the privilege of political revolt, a point remarked upon by the Czech playwright Václav Havel (*Prague*, page 80) just prior to being imprisoned in the late 1970s by the Soviet regime then governing Czechoslovakia: "No attempt at revolt could ever hope to set up even a minimum of resonance in the rest of society, because that society is 'soporific,' submerged in a consumer rat race...Even if revolt were possible, however, it would remain the solitary gesture of a few isolated individuals, and they would be opposed not only by a gigantic apparatus of national (and supranational) power, but also by the very society in whose name they were mounting their revolt in the first place."

The observation accounts for the past sell-by date of the celebrity guest alone and palely loitering in the green room with the bottled water and the banana. Who has time to think or care about political change when it's more than enough trouble to save oneself from drowning in the flood of technological change? All is not lost, however, for the magic word that stormed the Bastille and marched on the tsar's winter palace; let it give up its career as a noun, and as an adjective it can look forward to no end of on-camera promotional appearances with an up-and-coming surgical procedure, breakfast cereal, or video game.

Death of Julius Caesar, by Max Klinger, 1919.

1963: Chicago

HANNAH ARENDT RESTORES THE DEFINITION

The word *revolution* was originally an astronomical term which gained increasing importance in the natural sciences through Nicolaus Copernicus' *On the Revolutions of Heavenly Spheres* [*Nuremberg*, page 130]. In this scientific usage, it retained its precise Latin meaning, designating the regular, lawfully revolving motion of the stars, which, since it was known to be beyond the influence of man and hence irresistible, was certainly characterized neither by newness nor by violence. On the contrary, the word clearly indicates a recurring, cyclical movement; it is the perfect Latin translation of Polybius' *anacyclosis*, a term which also originated in astronomy and was used metaphorically in the realm of politics. If used for the affairs of men on earth, it could only signify that the few known forms of government revolve among the mortals in eternal recurrence and with the same irresistible force which makes the stars follow their preordained paths in the skies. Nothing could be further removed from the original meaning of the word *revolution* than the idea by which all revolutionary actors have been possessed and obsessed, namely, that they are agents in a process which spells the definite end of an old order and brings about the birth of a new world.

If the case of modern revolutions were as clear-cut as a textbook definition, the choice of the word *revolution* would be even more puzzling than it actually is. When the word first descended from the skies and was introduced to describe what happened on earth among mortal men, it appeared clearly as a metaphor, carrying over the notion of an eternal, irresistible, ever-recurring motion to the haphazard movements, the ups and downs of human destiny, which

have been likened to the rising and setting of sun, moon, and stars since times immemorial. In the seventeenth century, where we find the word for the first time as a political term, the metaphoric content was even closer to the original meaning of the word, for it was used for a movement of revolving back to some preestablished point and, by implication, of swinging back into a preordained order. Thus, the word was first used not when what we call a revolution broke out in England and Oliver Cromwell rose to the first revolutionary dictatorship, but on the contrary, in 1660, after the overthrow of the Rump Parliament and at the occasion of the restoration of the monarchy. In precisely the same sense, the word was used in 1688, when the Stuarts were expelled and the kingly power was transferred to William and Mary. The Glorious Revolution, the event through which very paradoxically the term found its definite place in political and historical language, was not thought of as a revolution at all, but as a restoration of monarchical power to its former righteousness and glory.

The fact that the word *revolution* meant originally "restoration," hence something which to us is its very opposite, is not a mere oddity of semantics. The revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which to us appear to show all evidence of a new spirit, the spirit of the modern age, were intended to be restorations. It is true, the civil wars in England foreshadowed a great many tendencies which we have come to associate with what was essentially new in the revolutions of the eighteenth century: the appearance of the Levellers and the formation of a party composed exclusively of lowly people, whose radicalism came into conflict with the leaders of the revolution, point clearly to the course of the French Revolution; while the demand for a written constitution as "the foundation for just government," raised by the Levellers and somehow fulfilled when Cromwell introduced an "Instrument of Government" to set up the Protectorate, anticipates one of the most important achievements, if not the most important one, of the American Revolution. Yet the fact is that the short-lived victory of this first modern revolution was officially understood as a restoration, namely as FREEDOM BY GOD'S BLESSING RESTORED, as the inscription runs on the great seal of 1651.

In our context it is even more important to note what happened more than a century later. For we are not here concerned with the history of revolutions as such, with their past, their origins, and course of development. If we want to learn what a revolution is—its general implications for man as a political being, its political significance for the world we live in, its role in modern history—we must turn to those historical moments when revolution made its full appearance, assumed a kind of definite shape, and began to cast its spell over the minds of men,

> *If there was ever a just war since the world began, it is this in which America is now engaged.*
> —*Thomas Paine, 1778*

quite independent of the abuses and cruelties and deprivations of liberty which might have caused them to rebel. We must turn, in other words, to the French and the American revolutions, and we must take into account that both were played in their initial stages by men who were firmly convinced that they would do no more than restore an old order of things that had been disturbed and violated by the despotism of absolute monarchy or the abuses of colonial government. They pleaded in all sincerity that they wanted to revolve back to old times when things had been as they ought to be.

This has given rise to a great deal of confusion, especially with respect to the American Revolution, which did not devour its own children and where therefore the men who had started the "restoration" were the same men who began and finished the revolution and even lived to rise to power and office in the new order of things. What they had thought was a restoration, the retrieving of their ancient liberties, turned into a revolution, and their thoughts and theories about the British constitution, the rights of Englishmen, and the forms of colonial government ended with a declaration of independence.

But the movement which led to revolution was not revolutionary except by inadvertence, and "Benjamin Franklin, who had more firsthand information about the colonies than any other man, could later write in all sincerity, 'I never had heard in any conversation from any person drunk or sober the least expression of a wish for a separation or hint that such a thing would be advantageous to America.'" Whether these men were "conservative" or "revolutionary" is indeed impossible to decide if one uses these words outside their historic context as generic terms, forgetting that conservatism as a political creed and an ideology owes its existence to a reaction to the French Revolution and is meaningful only for the history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. And the same point, though perhaps somewhat less unequivocally, can be made for the French Revolution; here too, in Alexis de Tocqueville's words, "One might have believed the aim of the coming revolution was not the overthrow of the old regime but its restoration." Even when in the course of both revolutions the actors became aware of the impossibility of restoration and of the need to embark upon an entirely new enterprise, and when therefore the very word *revolution* had already acquired its new meaning, Thomas Paine could still, true to the spirit of a bygone age, propose in all earnestness to call the American and the French revolutions by the name of "counterrevolutions." This proposition, odd indeed from the mouth of one of the most "revolutionary" men of the time, shows in a nutshell how dear the idea of revolving back, of restoration, was to the hearts and minds of the revolutionaries. Paine wanted no more than to recapture the old meaning of the word *revolution* and to express his firm conviction that the events of the time had caused men to revolve back to an "early period" when they had been in the possession of rights and liberties of which tyranny and conquest had dispossessed them. And his "early period" is by no means the hypothetical prehistorical state of nature, as the seventeenth century understood it, but a definite, though undefined, period in history.

From On Revolution. *Arendt studied under Martin Heidegger at the University of Marburg and completed her dissertation, "St. Augustine's Concept of Love," under Karl Jaspers at the University of Heidelberg in 1929. She came to the U.S. in 1941 and over the next twenty-five years published* The Origins of Totalitarianism, The Human Condition, *and* Eichmann in Jerusalem, *in which she coined the phrase "the banality of evil" to help explain Adolf Eichmann's role in the Holocaust. She died at the age of sixty-nine in 1975.*

Castles Beneath Cities, by Brad Downey, 2008. Amsterdam, Netherlands.

1938: Paris

SIMONE WEIL DEMYSTIFIES THE MAGIC WORD

One magic word today seems capable of compensating for all sufferings, resolving all anxieties, avenging the past, curing present ills, summing up all future possibilities: that word is *revolution*. It was not coined yesterday. It goes back more than a century and a half. A first attempt to apply it, from 1789 to 1793, produced something, but not what was expected of it. Since then, each generation of revolutionaries has, in its youth, believed itself to be destined to bring about the real revolution, has then gradually grown old and finally died transferring its hopes to succeeding generations; it runs no risk of being proved wrong, since it is dead. This word has aroused such pure acts of devotion, has repeatedly caused such generous blood to be shed, has constituted for so many unfortunates the only source of courage for living, that it is almost a sacrilege to investigate it; all this, however, does not prevent it from possibly being meaningless. It is only for priests that martyrs can be a substitute for proofs.

If one considers the system whose abolition is being called for, it seems that the word *revolution* has never had such an up-to-date significance, for it is obvious that this system is very sick indeed. If one turns toward its possible successors, one finds a paradoxical situation. At the present time there is no organized movement that actually takes the word *revolution* for a watchword determining the direction to be followed by action and propaganda. Yet never before has this watchword been adopted by so many people, and it has a special individual appeal for all who suffer in body or soul from the present conditions of existence, for all who are victims or who simply regard themselves as such, and for all who generously take to heart the fate of the victims surrounding them, and for many others besides. This word contains the solution of all the insoluble problems. The havoc caused by the last war, the preparations for a possible future war, weigh with ever greater force upon the peoples of the world; every disturbance in the circulation of money and goods, in credit, in capital investments, results in appalling misery; technical progress seems to bring the mass of people more overwork and insecurity than welfare; all this will vanish the moment the hour strikes for the revolution.

The worker who, when in the factory, "finds the hours drag," bound as he is to passive obedience and a dreary and monotonous task or thinks himself not intended for manual work, or is harried by a superior—or who, outside the factory gates, resents his inability to

> *The surest guide to the correctness of the path that women take is joy in the struggle. Revolution is the festival of the oppressed.*
>
> —*Germaine Greer, 1970*

stand himself such and such a treat available to customers well supplied with money—his thoughts run on the revolution. The unfortunate small shopkeeper, the ruined rentier, turn their eyes toward the revolution. The bourgeois adolescent in rebellion against home surroundings and school routine, the intellectual yearning for adventure and suffering from boredom, dream of the revolution. The engineer, whose reason and amour propre are alike offended by the priority given to financial over technological considerations, and who wants to see technology ruling the world, longs for the revolution. The majority of those who seriously take to heart liberty, equality, and the general welfare, who suffer at the sight of miseries and injustices, await the arrival of a revolution. If one were to take one by one all those who have ever uttered hopefully the word *revolution*, to seek out the true motives that have turned each of them in this direction, the precise changes, of a general or personal kind, which they genuinely look forward to, one would discover what an extraordinary variety of ideas and feelings can be covered by the same word. One would see how one man's revolution is not always that of his neighbor—far from it—how the two sorts of revolution are even very often incom-

patible. One would also find that there is often no connection between the aspirations of all kinds that this word represents in the minds of the men who utter it and the realities to which it is likely to correspond if the future should actually have a social upheaval in store.

At bottom, one thinks nowadays of the revolution not as a solution to the problems raised at the present time but as a miracle dispensing one from solving problems. The proof that it is so regarded is that it is expected to drop from the skies; one waits for it to happen, one does not ask oneself who is to bring it about. Few people are simpleminded enough to count in this respect on the big organizations, whether trade union or political, which with more or less conviction continue to claim to represent it. Although their headquarters are not absolutely devoid of capable men, the most optimistic glance cast around them would fail to detect the embryo of a team capable of carrying through a task of these dimensions. Those who form the second rank—the young—show no sign of containing the members of such a team. Anyway, these organizations reflect to a large extent the faults that they denounce in the society in which they are evolving; they even contain other more serious faults, as a result of the influence exerted on them from a distance by a certain totalitarian system worse than the capitalist system. As for the small groups of extremist or moderate tendency who accuse the big organizations of doing nothing and display such a touching perseverance in announcing the glad tidings, they would be harder put to it still to designate men capable of presiding at the birth of a new order.

One places one's trust, it is true—or at least one pretends to do so—in the spontaneity of the masses. June 1936, when the Popular Front party came to power under Prime Minister Léon Blum, provided a moving example of this spontaneity, which one imagined had been wiped out, in France, in the blood of the Commune. A tremendous, ungovernable outburst, springing from the very bowels of the masses, suddenly loosened the vice of social constraint, made the atmosphere at last breathable, changed opinions in all minds, and caused things that six months earlier had been looked upon as scandalous to be accepted as self-evident. Thanks to the incomparable power of persuasion possessed by force, millions of men made it clear—and in the first place to themselves—that they had a share in the sacred rights of humanity, something that even discerning minds had not been able to perceive at the time when they were weak. But that is all. Indeed unless it were to lead toward a more profound upheaval, that is all there could be. The masses do not pose problems, do not solve any; thus they neither organize nor construct. In any case they too are profoundly impregnated with the faults of the system under which they live, labor, and suffer. Their aspirations bear the imprint of that system. Capitalist society reduces everything to pounds, shillings, and pence; the aspirations of the masses are also expressed chiefly in pounds, shillings, and pence. The system is based on inequality; the masses give expression to unequal demands. The system is based on coercion; the masses, as soon as they have the right to speak, exercise in their own ranks a similar sort of coercion. It is difficult to see how there could spring up from the masses, spontaneously, the opposite of the system that has formed, or rather deformed, them.

One forms a strange idea in one's mind of the revolution when one comes to look closely at the matter. Indeed, to say that one forms an idea of it is to say too much. What are the signs by which the revolutionaries think they will be able to recognize the moment when the revolution is actually there? By the barricades and the firing in the streets? By a certain team of men being installed in the government? By the breach of legal forms? By specific acts of nationalization? By the massive exodus of the bourgeoisie? By the issuing of a decree abolishing private property? All that is not clear. However, the fact remains that one awaits under the name of "revolution" a time when the last shall be first, when the values negated or suppressed by the present system will occupy the forefront, when the slaves, albeit without abandoning their tasks,

A World, by Maximilian Lenz, 1899.

will be the only citizens, when the social callings at present doomed to submission, obedience, and silence will be the first to have the right to have their say and take their part in all matters of public interest. This has nothing to do with religious prophecies. Such a future is represented as corresponding to the normal development of history. This shows that one does not form any correct idea of the normal development of history. Even when one has studied it, one remains filled with vague memories of primary-school textbooks and chronological tables. People cite the example of 1789. We are told that what the bourgeoisie did with regard to the nobility in 1789, the proletariat will do with regard to the bourgeoisie in a year unspecified.

People think that in that year 1789, or at any rate, between 1789 and 1793, a hitherto subordinate social stratum, the bourgeoisie, drove out and replaced those who ruled society, the kings and nobles. In the same way they think that at a certain moment, designated by the term *great invasions*, the barbarians invaded the Roman empire, broke up the empire's administrative cadres, reduced the Romans to a very inferior status, and took over command everywhere. Why should the proletarians not do the same thing, in their own way? In effect, that is the way things happen in the textbooks. In the textbooks, the Roman empire lasts up to the beginning of the great invasions; after that, a new chapter opens. In the textbooks, the king, the nobility, and the clergy own France until the day when the Bastille falls; after that, it is the Third Estate. For years we have all absorbed this catastrophic notion of history, where the catastrophes are marked by the ends or the beginnings of chapters; we do not get rid of it, and we regulate our action upon it. The division of history textbooks into chapters will cost us many disastrous mistakes.

From Oppression and Liberty. *Called by Albert Camus "the only great spirit of our time," Weil once wrote, "Our science is like a store filled with the most subtle intellectual devices for solving the most complex problems, and yet we are almost incapable of applying the elementary principles of rational thought." While in London during World War II, she ate only as much as the official ration of her compatriots in occupied France and, weakened, died of tuberculosis in 1943. Much of Weil's writings, among them* The Need for Roots *and* Waiting for God, *were published posthumously.*